

Recycle Right: Putting fall “garbage” to use

By Jeremy Marin

Autumn’s “garbage” provides a wealth of opportunities for next year’s garden. Not just **leaves**, but **pumpkins** and **potted plants**, too. (But leave the straw bale.)

Leaves are, of course, the most obvious beneficial garbage. If you shred leaves, they not only decompose faster, but they don’t blow around the yard and they look better.

Shredded leaves get put to use:

1. As carbon-rich material in the [compost](#).
2. Covering garden beds where it moderate temperature fluctuations, holds the top soil in place, provides food for worms (who do great work in the soil all winter), and adds nutrients as they decompose. In the spring they easily rake off.
3. On walking paths/rows, so weeds don’t grow.
4. Flower gardens and raspberry patches are covered in shredded leaves to keep them moist and to keep weeds at bay.

You can shred leaves with a power mower or a leaf shredder. Inexpensive [electric](#) models do a decent job, better when the leaves are dry and there are no sticks.

Note: Oak leaves break down slowly due to high lignin levels, but like everything else, once they break down, [they are not acidic](#). Try to avoid leaves from yards that are treated with herbicides/pesticides.

Pumpkins are plentiful on the curb after Halloween and, in Arlington, cannot be taken with municipal yard waste. Pumpkins provides great nitrogen-rich material for your compost, a great way to get the carbon:nitrogen balance necessary for your compost, especially this time of year when you’ve got a lot of carbon-rich leaves.

Consider putting out a container and asking people to [give you their pumpkins](#), then invite friends for a smashing pumpkins event for kids and adults, before adding the nitrogen-rich material to the compost.

Decorative potted plants, most frequently mums, are probably the most overlooked “garbage” item of fall. These are basically containers of peat with some fertilizer mixed in that happen to have some dead flowers stuck in them.

I don’t like buying peat because of depletion and the climate [change](#) gasses their harvesting releases, but if these are on their way to the incinerator, take them. The material in these pots can be used all sorts of ways, such as:

1. Potting up plants,
2. Seed starting,

3. Simply grind it and spread over the lawn,
4. Or my preferred option, composting.

Drive around the neighborhood early to mid November and you'll see dozens of these available on garbage day. Take them home and toss the bucket of peat in the compost.

Note: Even if these pots of flowers have been treated with potentially bee-harming neonicotinoid pesticides, studies show [they do NOT survive composting](#).

Hay/Straw are also widely available on garbage day. Unfortunately, hay fields are often treated with broadleaf herbicides in the pyralid family. These persistent herbicides not only survive consumption by animals, they [survive the composting process](#) as well, sometimes lasting for three or more years after composting. They'll kill off all broadleaf plants, including tomatoes, eggplant, peas, and much more.

So unless you know whether that hay/straw was treated, you might want to leave it at the curb.

A more detailed version of this piece, with pumpkin recycling signs, links to studies, and more is viewable at www.ArlingtonHEET.org.

Arlington Recycling Committee welcomes your involvement as a recycler, as a volunteer at recycling events, or as a committee member. Information can be found at arlingtonma.gov/recycling, or use the Town's Request/Answer page. Select "Ask a Question" and choose the "Recycling" category so your question is routed to Arlington's recycling coordinator.